

Against the Grain: Teaching Historical Complexity

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I recently refinished an old wooden dresser for my daughter’s bedroom. As I squinted through a cloud of sawdust, I reflected for a moment on the similarities between woodworking and good history teaching. Both are skills that require practice for improvement; both demand respectful attention to the richness and complexity of the material. But there is one key difference. In sanding the dresser, I was careful to always work with the grain. Experienced teachers, however, often reveal their skill in purposely teaching against the grain.

Many teachers and scholars have written about the importance of inquiry in effective history instruction. At its core, inquiry involves student investigation of a significant historical problem: Did people at the time of Columbus really think the world was flat? Why did Jamestown’s early settlers starve? Was Lincoln a racist?¹

These kinds of inquiry problems work—that is, they engage students while developing their historical thinking—in part because they reflect the complexity of the past and of our understanding of it. The Common Core Standards underscore the importance of complex understanding. The Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies call for students to “evaluate various explanations for actions or events,” “evaluate authors’ differing point of view,” and “integrate information from diverse sources.”²

Skilled teachers help students appreciate historical complexity by confronting students’ simple, intuitive understandings of the past. First, teachers must think about the common assumptions, often implicit, that students bring to particular historical topics. Then they have to think about how to counter those assumptions, often quite

provocatively, to force students to wrestle with the complexity of the past. In other words, teachers have to work against the grain.

The teacher’s task would be challenging enough if the only responsibility was to strategically work against the grain. But a teacher also needs to recognize historical topics for which there might be no “grain” for students, as well as situations in which teaching against the grain might be detrimental. A teacher who can differentiate these three situations and address each one appropriately has indeed mastered the skill of teaching history.

Teaching Against the Grain

The most common teaching situation involves anticipating the assumptions students bring to a particular subject and then strategically countering those assumptions. The teacher’s goal should be to help students understand the complexity of the past, the reality that simple answers are rarely adequate.

Teachers may assume that they are working with a functionally blank slate when they introduce students to a particular subject for the first time. But that assumption is generally mistaken. Students are never blank slates, and they

have often formed impressions of many historical topics before receiving formal classroom instruction—frequently via popular culture.

Consider the examples mentioned in the introduction. Bruce VanSledright discovered that fifth grade students had clear ideas about Jamestown from the animated Disney film *Pocahontas*; Bob Bain showed how popular mythologizing convinces students that Columbus was unique in his understanding that the earth is a sphere; and Sam Wineburg demonstrated that students learn to believe that Lincoln unwaveringly held the “right” perspective on slavery throughout his life.³

Even when students’ views aren’t shaped by particular ideas from popular culture, students are often influenced by broader cultural notions that they then apply to classroom content. For example, students’ general bias in favor of modern technology often makes them disdainful of people in the past who did not have access to that technology. Sam Wineburg noted, for example, that a very bright AP U.S. History student thought Revolutionary era soldiers were foolish for fighting in straight lines—not understanding the nature of warfare before the widespread use of accurate rifles.⁴

So what does teaching against the grain look like? When I taught American history, I found that in dealing with the antebellum and Civil War eras students adopted a strictly dichotomous moral view of sectional divisions—the North was morally in

the right, and the South simply refused to see it. That view typically translated into an assumption that Southern whites were uniformly racist and Northerners uniformly egalitarian. Teaching against the grain in this case meant providing students a primary source excerpt from a Northern white—perhaps even an abolitionist—articulating views Americans would understand today as racist. I tried (not always successfully) to guide such discussions so students learned how rare racial egalitarianism was in the nineteenth century, rather than simply concluding that Northern whites were hypocrites.

In teaching about American reform movements, I discovered that students typically assume that (1) society agrees that a particular issue is a problem worthy of reform, (2) heroic individuals rise up to provide change, and (3) that reform efforts always succeed. In this case, I tried to teach against the grain by (1) studying reforms that many today would not be concerned about, like Sabbatarianism (strict observance of the Sabbath), (2) showing how larger organizations were often indispensable in leading reform efforts, such as the American Anti-Slavery Society, and (3) exploring reform efforts that did not succeed in their time (e.g., Ida Wells's anti-lynching campaign) or reforms that were considered successful at the time, but became problematic later on (e.g., the initiative system, which allows citizens to place propositions on the ballot, but sometimes leads to questionable laws.)

For world history, students often implicitly assume that imperialist powers succeeded because of greater intellect—perhaps even nobler character—rather than largely through better technology. I say “implicitly,” because most students sense that such a view might not be culturally acceptable, but have tacitly learned a narrative of Western superiority for which they have no alternative. Teaching against the grain in these cases surely includes providing documents whenever possible

that reveal the views of subject peoples articulately rejecting their oppression. In teaching about British imperialism in India, for example, I used the Azamgarh Proclamation of 1857 to show Indian grievances against British rule.

Teaching against the grain often means building “empathy”: challenging students to understand people, their attitudes, and their actions in historical, contextual ways.⁵ This does not necessarily mean destroying previously held beliefs—often there is some truth in them. Rather, it means requiring students to reexamine their beliefs and develop more nuanced understandings of more than one perspective.

When There is No Grain

If skilled teaching routinely includes teaching against the grain, it equally involves recognizing when no such grain exists. I argued earlier that students are never blank slates—that they always bring preformed ideas about historical topics to the classroom. That does not mean, however, that students make the particular assumptions their teachers (or textbook authors) think they do. If teachers target the wrong assumption (i.e., a non-existent grain), then by definition there is nothing to counter, nothing to teach against. In that situation, the “counter” position teachers seek to create simply becomes students' default understanding of that subject.

For example, one college-level world history textbook discusses the elaborate burial goods archaeologists found with a particular hunter-gatherer's remains, suggesting that status differences existed among such groups. The section of text is designed to go against the grain of the notion that hunter-gatherers were egalitarian (that is, that they did not make social class distinctions) and that social classes developed later through the accumulation of goods among sedentary agricultural people.

The only problem is that the author is working against a non-existent grain in my particular classroom. Most of my students had not internalized the

conventional notion that class differences emerge only among sedentary people. So the textbook's narrative could not challenge this “conventional” notion. Instead, the textbook account simply became most students' default understanding: status differences existed among hunter-gatherers, and these differences continued to exist afterward. This understanding did not represent the complex view the author intended to develop for students.

Similarly, the popular world history textbook I used in my Advanced Placement world history course devoted significant text to the beneficial effects of Mongol imperialism—the reestablishment of long-distance trade and the free flow of beliefs across the Eurasian landmass. While this view reflects recent scholarship regarding the *Pax Mongolica*, the upbeat appraisal of the Mongol conquest seemed unbalanced.⁶ It's difficult to imagine a contemporary textbook offering such a positive assessment of nineteenth century European imperialism.

The text clearly sought to counter older, often stereotyped discussions of bloody Mongol conquest that would have led previous students to view the Mongols as uniquely harsh imperialists—rather than being broadly similar to other empire-builders. Unfortunately, however, my students had no such previous impressions of the Mongols. So after reading the textbook's narrative, my students generally adopted uncomplicated positive views about the Mongols. Again, this was not the understanding the textbook authors hoped to generate.

Dissatisfied with my students' understanding, I developed an activity that required them to create their own textbook narrative of the Mongols. Their narrative had to take into account both their textbook's portrayal and an excerpt from David Morgan's *The Mongols*—which spares no details regarding the material and human destruction wrought by Mongol expansion.⁷ In this way, I taught against the grain—ironically, the

grain created by the textbook authors themselves in their effort to counter a narrative they mistakenly believed the current generation of students holds.

In American history, teaching against the grain often means helping students to recognize that key historical figures were the exception, rather than the rule. In a laudable effort to provide positive examples to students, textbooks occasionally emphasize women or minorities who resisted oppression. But if students lack a clear understanding of the conditions these groups faced at the time, too much attention to these unique individuals risks distortion.

For example, extensive classroom or textbook attention to the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments often tacitly conveys to students that women's rights constituted a vastly popular movement in the mid-nineteenth century. But in a nation of over 23 million, only 300 people attended the convention—and only a third of those signed the final document. Teaching against the grain does not mean ignoring this important milestone in women's rights, but it does mean countering a triumphant narrative by showing students the existence of widespread resistance to notions of women's equality. One effective way to go against the grain with this topic is to use a text by an educated, articulate woman like Catherine Beecher, arguing in favor of women's submission to men.

The examples of teaching against a non-existent grain all involve mistaken assumptions—often by textbook authors—that students possess an opinion on a given historical topic. Just as teachers need to uncover the assumptions students actually bring to class, they must also avoid projecting onto students views the students don't have.

When Not to Teach Against the Grain

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, sometimes the best thing a skilled teacher can do is refuse to teach against the grain. History teachers are sometimes tempted to assume that complexity is always

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Mongol soldiers by Rashid al-Din, 1305 (Photograph by German image bank AKG-Images, published in *The Mongols and the West*, Peter Jackson, 2005.)

good, and that greater understanding will arise from a rousing debate. But in some situations, attempting to create complexity only grants legitimacy to harmful perspectives.

The most obvious case of refusing to teach against the grain involves Holocaust deniers. Trained scholars of the Holocaust uniformly reject the legitimacy of those who claim that the Holocaust never happened. Given the prominence of denial websites, teachers would be remiss to ignore the topic altogether when teaching about the Holocaust. Their best strategy, however, is probably to provide a clear, categorical statement rejecting the accuracy of such views and explaining the Anti-Semitic motivations of deniers. Teachers might direct interested students to the statement on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's website, and its related links on the development of denial and ways to combat denial.⁸

Students should not be asked to debate the topic in point-counterpoint fashion; to do so would simply convey that denial constitutes a legitimate stance. Likewise, teachers sometimes ask students to evaluate denial websites as an exercise in evaluating historical evidence. But such exercises must be carefully structured with clear goals.⁹ Poorly conceived activities run the risk of backfiring, leading some students—who

might never have given denial a second thought—to find denial to be plausible.

Closer to home, and perhaps more controversially, I would argue that teachers should avoid scenarios that promote a “Lost Cause” version of the Civil War as an acceptable interpretation. It is entirely appropriate to encourage students to consider the complex motives and perspectives of various figures in the North and in the South, multiple factors that contributed to the outbreak of the war, the reality that soldiers on both sides acted heroically—as well as barbarically—and the fact that soldiers on both sides suffered. But students should not be encouraged to adopt a romantic view of the war as a tragedy that destroyed a noble way of life. This does not mean passing judgment on Southern whites; Northern whites were deeply implicated in the system of slavery. But the fact remains that there was nothing noble about the antebellum way of life as far as slaves were concerned.

There is a clear difference between understanding the historical views of white Southerners at the time of their defeat and endorsing the legitimacy of those views today. Any appropriate assessment of the war today must take account of the views and experiences of all Americans. That undeniably includes the nearly four million African

Americans freed as a result of the war—for whom Union victory and emancipation were cause for great celebration. Allowing students to view the Confederacy's defeat simply as a tragic event, manifestly ignores the injustices experienced by African Americans as chattel and the great significance of liberation.

The difference between the examples described here and those in the first section is that the views described in this section involve interpretations offered by people today, rather than the views of historical figures. These interpretations have the potential of doing social harm in the present. In thinking about which topics or views are legitimate for creating activities to teach against the grain, teachers may want to consider a sort of litmus test. Is this a “defensible” view? Is it frequently employed by racist organizations? Could it cause some students to feel threatened? Does it disregard anyone's rights as described in the Constitution? If the answer to any of the questions is “yes,” then I believe that teachers have an ethical obligation to avoid encouraging students to endorse such views.

Conclusion

None of what I have discussed above is easy. Like woodworking, effective history teaching takes skill. Teachers make many decisions—some in advance, some on the fly—and then have to execute their plans in engaging, age-appropriate ways. Any skill requires a lot of practice to achieve mastery. And like woodworking, the skill of a good teacher deepens over time, as many judgments become almost second nature.

A skilled teacher recognizes three different teaching scenarios. First, he or she anticipates the concepts and knowledge that students bring to class, and then works thoughtfully to counter those assumptions in order to deepen students' understanding. The biggest challenge teachers face here is identifying students' pre-instructional assumptions. Research on student thinking can be very helpful in this regard.¹⁰ But often

the best source of knowledge is teachers' own experience with the youth in the classroom and in society at large. At best, educational research can identify broad generalizations; individual teachers can fine-tune these generalizations as they attend to the comments students make year in and year out. Teachers act as anthropologists, gathering data about the beliefs students reveal as they make comments in class.¹¹

Second, skilled teachers recognize when there is no “grain” for students, no preconception. Teachers' anthropological work includes identifying what students *don't* assume about a topic as much as what students do assume. Teachers should also try to read texts through the eyes of students, identifying places where the text assumes that a preconception exists. Teachers should recognize these lapses by textbook authors as an opportunity for historical inquiry. The Stanford History Education Group website *Reading Like a Historian* provides a number of lessons that explicitly require students to consider textbook accounts alongside primary and secondary texts on the same subject.¹²

Finally, skilled teachers should realize that not everything is up for debate. Teachers can avoid legitimating conspiracy theories by choosing not to explore whether Area 51 hides aliens, the moon landing was faked, or the federal government orchestrated the Twin Towers collapse. They certainly want to avoid giving credence to Holocaust deniers. Some readers may disagree with me regarding the viability of Lost Cause arguments, to which I would reply that I'm offering guidelines, rather than rules. Individual teachers will have to make their personal judgments, which they have to be able to explain to others, and justify to themselves. This is a reminder that teachers make any number of tough instructional choices based on a variety of considerations—about the amount of time they can devote to a particular lesson, conversations they've already had about related subjects, the maturity of their students, etc. Teaching is a

profession, and like any skilled craft, it takes a lot of work to achieve mastery. 🌟

Notes

1. See, respectively, Bruce A. VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Robert B. Bain, “‘They Thought the World Was Flat?: Applying the Principles of *How People Learn* in Teaching High School History,” in *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*, eds. M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005); and Sam Wineburg, “Reading Abraham Lincoln” in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 89-112.
2. The Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies are available at the Common Core Standards website: www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/introduction
3. See Note 1 for references
4. See Wineburg, *Ibid.*, 7-12.
5. On historical empathy, see O.L. Davis Jr., Elizabeth Anne Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster, eds. *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001)
6. One might note that the label *Pax Mongolica* is modeled on the earlier *Pax Romana*, of which Tacitus observed, “They make a desolation and call it peace.” See Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, and Dialogus*, trans. M. Hutton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 81.
7. David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
8. See “Holocaust Denial and Distortion” on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website, www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/denial/
9. For a constructive example of this strategy, see the Anti-Defamation League's “Holocaust Denial: An Online Guide to Exposing and Combating Anti-Semitic Propaganda,” <http://archive.adl.org/holocaust/response.asp>
10. For a recent overview of research on student historical thinking, see Keith C. Barton, “Research on Students' Ideas About History,” in *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*, eds. Linda S. Levstik and Cynthia A. Tyson (New York: Routledge, 2008).
11. See Robert B. Bain, “Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
12. Stanford History Education Group, *Reading Like a Historian*, <http://sheg.stanford.edu/rh>

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